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Europe into the breach

By Volker Perthes

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BERLIN:

Some diplomatic movement has returned to the Middle East. Under American supervision, Israelis and Palestinians have been negotiating again since the end of 2007. Syria and Israel have begun an indirect negotiation process with Turkey as a mediator. In Lebanon, a new government including all relevant political factions has finally been formed.

This would not have been possible without a green light from Syria. And this green light would not have come had Damascus not been convinced that its own negotiations with Israel could, in the medium term at least, lead to a bilateral agreement and also bring about an improvement of Syrian-American relations. Individual European Union states have already honored this constructive about-turn of Syrian policies.

For all those engaged in Middle East diplomacy - this goes for the Arab-Israeli fold as well as for the Iranian nuclear file - the U.S. political calendar is always present: No one expects the current U.S. administration to settle any of the conflicts in the region or to bring any of the ongoing diplomatic processes there to a conclusion during the rest of its term.

This is explicitly so for the Syrian-Israeli negotiations: Syria has already declared that it would not move from indirect to direct talks before the inauguration of a new American administration ready to actively engage with such a process.

Implicitly, however, the same applies to the Annapolis process between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. President Bush has repeatedly said that he wants the two sides to reach an agreement while he is still in office.

Israel's outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, who lead the talks, are both aware of the contours of a possible, mutually acceptable agreement, and they seem to have come closer with regard to some of the particularly difficult so-called final-status issues.

Nonetheless, even under the most positive scenario, the best one could expect is a further narrowing of the gaps. A comprehensive agreement that would sort out such complex issues as the future of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees, future borders between Israel and Palestine, or infrastructural links between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, will not be reached within only a couple of months.

And neither Israel's prime minister nor the Palestinian president would today have the authority and the necessary majorities to ratify, let alone to implement a peace agreement.

All this does not speak against the process, only against exaggerated expectations. The process is extremely fragile, and it could easily break down - particularly in the absence of sustained external "care," of guidance and support from a third party both able and prepared to drive the process forward and encourage the negotiating parties to continue their efforts even in the face of domestic opposition.

The current U.S. administration will cease to play its role after the November elections; many of its representatives will by then be looking for new jobs. The new U.S. president will first have to get his senior officials confirmed by Congress, and a foreign policy review, before he begins any major policy initiative. As a result, we should expect a time-out for any active American involvement in the Middle East peace process between the end of this year and at least March or April 2009.

Herein lays Europe's challenge. As an active partner in the so-called Middle East Quartet with the United States, Russia and the United Nations, the EU has helped to bring about the current talks between Israelis and Palestinians.

The EU and several of its member states are contributing to the process through the support of state- and institution-building in the Palestinian territories, particularly in the security and justice sectors.

But beyond that, the EU must now prepare itself to keep the process alive from the end of this year through to next spring. Considering such a task we also have to be aware of the particular structures of the Union.

President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, which currently holds the rotating presidency of the EU, has already announced a more active support for the Middle East peace process. But the French presidency ends in December 2008, and the Czech government, which takes over in January 2009, is unlikely to summon the same energy and resources for the Middle East.

The EU's special representative for the Middle East, the Belgian diplomat Marc Otte, does not have enough political weight to assume a role that so far has been played by the U.S. secretary of state. Individual EU states like France, Germany or Spain would have the resources and diplomatic skills and could even be interested in temporarily guiding the process until a new American administration resumes this function.

In practice, however, jealousy among EU states would make it impossible for any one of them to act for Europe in this or any other important foreign-policy field, unless this country happens to hold the EU presidency. EU states that want to promote a consensual and common European approach would therefore not even try to assume this role; others that might want to take it on would not be able to fill it.

This does not make the EU incapable of acting. The Union, through its Council of Foreign Ministers, should as soon as possible give a mandate to Javier Solana, the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU, to make himself available, with the approval of Israel, the Palestinians, and the current U.S. administration, as a temporary mediator for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations from the end of the year.

Solana would not take such an initiative on his own, but he can do so with a mandate from the Council. His staff is familiar with the subject matter and his diplomatic skills are beyond doubt.

Any coalition of willing EU states could support him by delegating some of their own experienced diplomats to his office for the task. Solana and the EU would not be expected to make peace or to bring the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations to a conclusion and to dispel any opposition to an agreement. This cannot be done by the EU, simply because, compared to the United States, it has less influence over Israel and cannot give security guarantees to either Israel or the Palestinians.

The EU, however, can act as a temporary trustee for the process, thereby preventing it from breaking down and, given its knowledge of the regional situation, help the parties to find practical solutions for some of the most complicated final-status questions - for example, the political division of Jerusalem as the future capital of two states - only to hand back the process and the role of external guidance to Washington once the new administration there is ready for it.

As an active trustee in this sense, the EU could not only show that it lives up to its own claim of contributing to crisis management through preventive diplomacy, it would also demonstrate to the new U.S. administration how high a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ranges on the European list of priorities, and how useful it can be for the United States to cooperate on this with its trans-Atlantic partners.

Volker Perthes is the director of Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin.

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